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**‘I’M THE BOSS’ -**

**A study of leadership and the labour divide in some secondary schools**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Philosophy  
in  
Women’s Studies at Massey University**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

When is a principal not a principal ... when s/he is an associate principal.

The position of associate principal in secondary schools in New Zealand is a site of contradiction. At the same time as the associate is a principal she (often he) is not a principal. As schools with a population of more than 1400 students expand their rolls (Sergiovanni, 1995, Grace, 1995) they can choose (O'Neill, 1996; Armstrong, 1991) whether to include an associate principal in their management structure. While some of these schools turn down the offer, others choose to do so. That such a possibility is available suggests that hierarchical structures (Court, 1993; Regan, 1995) in these organisations are breaking down. It would appear that schools can design the management structure that best suits them, and that their leaders create their own 'badge of office' (Raymond & Cunliffe, 1997), and enact 'their' particular vision (Hegelson, 1990; Belenky et al, 1989).

Devolution of power (Lukes, 1974; Smyth, 1989; Deem et al, 1995) to community level contains the possibility of more democratic and participatory leadership (Wilson, 1995; Brosnahan, 1996). The role of the state (O'Neill, 1996; Armstrong, 1992) in endorsing

and effecting these changes is central. In contradictory fashion the state is both present and absent in the operation of secondary schools. It claims to be an unequivocal advocate of Equal Employment Opportunity practices (James & Saville-Smith, 1992), yet at the same time will allow one principal only to lead and manage (Grace, 1995; Olsson, 1996) a school. The power that schools have to make decisions around leadership is not as clear cut as it might seem.

Historically and persistently schools have been led by men (Grace, 1995). Common belief, largely unquestioned, (Connell, 1987; Court, 1994) suggests that 'strong men' (Connell, 1996; Eveline, 1996; Hurty, 1995; Court, 1989) are required in the schools of today. Women seem (Wodak, 1997; Eveline, 1996) not to fit the bill (Still, 1996; Acker, 1991; Evetts, 1996), thus are not appointed. Many more women, it is generally asserted, prefer to teach rather than manage (Shakeshaft, 1989). Typically women are thought to have a different style (Rosener, 1990; Ferrario, 1991; Southworth, 1993) of leadership which may not be suitable in the competitive educational marketplace of the present (Wilson, 1996; Smyth, 1989), but suited to a collaborative (Brosnahan, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994) organisational culture, perhaps of the future.

The position of associate principal can function as a transitional position, providing a formal mentoring opportunity (Woodd, 1997; Ehrlich, 1995). Whether it can facilitate the movement of women into senior management, and reduce principal isolation, is explored in this thesis.

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## **Introduction**

In New Zealand the educational marketplace, as it has become, is rife with competition, and numbers of students are what counts. The importance of 'image' is clearly visible in the modern marketplace (O'Neill, 1996; Jones et al, 1990) where branding is an all pervasive and consumptive process. A pyramidal metaphor (Regan, 1995) prevails, its clean lines representing efficiency (O'Neill, 1996), and the apex representing leadership with vision (Hegelson, 1990; Hargreaves, 1994).

At the time I started thinking about doing this research I had been promoted to the senior management team of a middle-sized secondary school. A quasi-kind of promotion, this is a short-term revolving position, designed to provide the opportunity for professional development within a workplace. Two other features of this team are atypical, namely a significant devolution of power both within the team and throughout the staff, and a co-principalship leading the team.

Communities, ostensibly, have the power through elected Boards of Trustees to decide how schools are governed and managed (Deem, 1993). This school's community endorsed through its board a new arrangement, the co-principalship, within an expanded team. Team management has proliferated in the last ten years (Grace, 1995), an outcome, it seems, of the removal of the state from its central role in education at local level. Formal approval from the centre, however, was withheld - while some flexibility is deemed

possible the state decrees (Armstrong, 1992) that no school is able to appoint more than one principal.

Coincidentally a friend and colleague was appointed to the position of associate principal in another school, a large school (Sergiovanni, 1995). Her struggle to define, and indeed name, (Court, 1989; Jones, 1991) her position, also not traditional in the sense of standing apart from the norm, grabbed my attention.

The state prescribes one leader, a prescription that is almost without exception swallowed. Only a few seek alternative medicine (Regan, 1995; Hegelson, 1990) that like its namesake remains marginalised. The concept of hegemony (Connell, 1987, 1996; Court 1994) illuminates my discussion, providing a framework in which I can find some rationale for this easy acceptance of sometimes bitter medicine.

Sharing power is an option that has not been fought for even though it is acknowledged that the job of a secondary school principal is more onerous, and isolating (Evetts, 1994) in present times. Nonetheless, the single principal reigns (Duerst-Lahti & Kelly, 1995; Still, 1996). Just who possesses the power to decide, and why the sector, not usually backward in coming forward, is mute on this issue I determined to find out. Power is difficult to define, and although in schools is usually associated with the position and/or person of the principal, it is anonymous, invested in everyone but no-one in particular. It has a subtlety, shaping people's perceptions (Lukes, 1974; Bartky, 1990; Foucault, 1980; Smyth, 1989; Deem et al, 1995) in such a way that they accept their role in the existing

order of things. A moving beyond the explicit is required to consider how, although contrary to people's interests, their beliefs and desires may be modified so that only certain outcomes are possible. Direct resourcing, size of schools, shared leadership are specific instances that this thesis explores.

School leadership is almost always assumed by men although women now dominate schools, at least numerically. Numerical dominance has not resulted in equality in the exercise of authority, financial remuneration or full representation of women in the areas of knowledge creation and dissemination (Court, 1994). The pervasive stereotype of the spinster teacher is now largely replaced by an image of a married woman. I explore presumptions that are commonly used to explain the dearth of women in these senior positions: her half-hearted interest in teaching compared to her family responsibilities (Acker, 1983), her lack of desire to pursue a management path (Eveline, 1996), her lack of appropriate experience (Burgess, 1989), her emotions (Hurty, 1995). Collectively a certain kind of male power and female sub-ordination is sustained (Connell, 1987; Court, 1989). Women who 'make it' model the exception rather than the rule (Davies, 1989).

Socialising institutions like schools construct an administrative world that is male-suited, and that largely excludes women (Ozga, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1989). Defining career aspirations in an hierarchical sense (Shakeshaft, 1989; Evetts, 1994), drawing a status divide between teaching and administration (Court, 1994), equating strength, narrowly defined, and successful leadership (Connell, 1996; Eveline, 1996; Court, 1989; Hurty, 1995) are unquestioned norms that act as barriers to women's advancement. Still,

organisational theory largely ignores gender and banishes sexuality and emotion (Acker, 1991; Wilson, 1996; Hearn et al, 1989), privileging rationality and efficiency. In organisational logic jobs are presented in an abstract sense, devoid of person, and linear progression up the career ladder is the normative path (Evetts, 1994). Qualities and skills inherent in female-dominated jobs, viewed as 'women's work' (Neville, 1988) an extension of natural abilities, are overlooked by evaluators (Marshall, 1994). There are serious implications given the climate of appraisal, efficiency and competition that characterises today's schools (O'Neill, 1996; Grace, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994).

Typically two separate hierarchies structure schools, subject administration the mainstream to the lesser hierarchy of pastoral administration (Court, 1993; Acker, 1991; Shakeshaft, 1987). A colleague, appointed to an associate principal's position in a large urban secondary school found herself framed in this way. An assumption of a power sharing arrangement in fact produced what seemed to be a gendered division of tasks (Burton, 1988, Court, 1996): the 'real' (Weedon, 1987), male, principal spends much time out of the school, shoring up old boy networks (Olsson, 1992; Armstrong, 1992; Eveline, 1996; Cockburn, 1991), negotiating about buildings and the like, while she attends to the daily business of the school, managing its population of students (Neville, 1988; Tong, 1992). I was keen to explore more deeply this division of labour, to determine how principals and associate principals decided (Tannen, 1994) 'who did what' (Still, 1996; Cunnison, 1989), and what this could mean for students (Davies, 1989; Watson, 1989; Smyth, 1989).

As a woman in the sciences I was no stranger to distorted sex ratios. Identifying strongly with the ‘roar of women’ voiced by Helen Reddy in the 1970s I knew about barriers to women’s advancement. Confident that I would have sufficient merit (O’Neill, 1996) to scale the hierarchical ladder I did not question the way in which this, and other concepts like choice, career, and indeed, women, were defined. Feminist poststructuralism (Weedon, 1987) with its opportunity to unpack ‘woman’, to consider transient, contested, contradictory subjectivities resonated. Access to the notion of discourse (Jones, 1991; Coates, 1997; Wodak, 1997) the ways in which our realities are constructed in language, lays bare the complex and multiple power relations of contemporary organisations. Different discourses position us in different ways in relation to the world but we also use these discourses to subvert, resist, effect change. Reconceptualising leadership is one such possibility (Regan, 1995; Lane, 1996).

This research specifically investigated six leaders (three males and three females) as detailed below, to find out how they had gained purchase in the world of school leadership.

<b>School</b>	<b>Principal</b>	<b>Associate Principal</b>	<b>Type of School</b>
Y	Male	Male	Boys
X	Female	Female	Girls
Z	Male	Female	Co-educational

Figure 1 : Leaders and school type

If conventional leadership (Hurty, 1995; Hegelson, 1990; Brosnahan, 1996) has so little to offer women, why and how had these female leaders been successful? Could, and should, the position of associate principal facilitate the promotion of women to the position of principal? These leaders, the subjects of my research, are three principals and three associate principals. Their accounts provide an 'insider' view. My record, and interpretation, of their experiences cannot be generalised to all leaders in secondary schools across different times and places. Nonetheless, the intersections and disjunctures with other accounts in the literature are instructive. Too often accounts of leaders in schools issue from the calm domains of those in academia, some of whom have eschewed a career as a secondary teacher. These are leaders in action (Southworth, 1993), and the context in which they operate has a significant impact on the way they practice their craft.

In order to do justice to my eclectic academic background and to more adequately represent the stories these leaders told me, I have adopted an idiosyncratic approach in writing this thesis. What is produced is an interweaving of the commentary of these leaders with my own narrative as a researcher-educator, supported by links to relevant literature. 'Relevance' is a significant term in this regard. A kind of stew is produced, the ingredients chosen by me and mixed in the way that I choose. Can this count as real research? I argue that speaking from the 'truth' of my own experience has validity, as no research is actually value-free. A so-called objectivity characteristic of traditional research gives way to a critical distance between researcher and subject (Reinharz, 1992; Stanley & Wise, 1983; Oakley, 1987; Mies, 1983).

It is necessary, then, to describe my own background given that I am positioned within a number of discourses, and am positioned by the discourses I am describing (Loveridge, 1992; Davies, 1996). In so far as experience is meaningful it is constituted so through language (Weedon, 1987). This does not mean that experience does not exist but rather that the ways in which we understand and express it are never independent of language. Experience can never be a reliable guide to 'the real' (Fuss, 1989) but still has a role in the realm of knowledge production.

In this thesis, then, I have included the voices of the six educational leaders, quoting from the interviews that I transcribed. At times I have left their voices to speak for themselves, though the context in which I have placed them will make my intent clear. Sometimes I have endeavoured to interpret their comments, and at other times I link the comment to the literature I have read. In other instances I offer as a counterpoint my working observations of a co-principalship in action.

This becomes a kind of metaphor where the structure of the thesis itself represents the spectrum along which I move, as a female, teacher, administrator, mother, researcher. Interview comments can be 'read' in a myriad of ways. The associate principal of X School describes one aspect of communication in the school:

*The secretaries are adept at sorting out to whom parents and other callers need to be referred; they are dealt with according to need. Student welfare has passed to the Guidance Co-ordinator. Parents may be referred there first, and, if a disciplinary*



*matter, be referred back to the management team. Some parents still demand to see THE principal. (AP:X).*

My immediate response is to read into this comment the ethic of negotiation and consultation, evidence of a reworking of responsibilities, a culture of caring (Blackmore, 1989), a recognition of the traditional hierarchical structure, and that schools are communities which include parents (Deem et al, 1995). None of this may seem remarkable but when I indicate that this is a girls' school (which may or may not be self-evident), add commentary about the kind of power that women typically display (Rosener, 1990; Wodak, 1997), and contemplate the unchallenged 'power over' mode prevalent in the discourse of school leadership, a different kind of narrative is constructed. If I then juxtapose this comment with one from the principal of another school a decidedly different story is told.

*Office staff know that I am only available to take calls from the CEO of the Ministry, Review Office etc - other calls will be diverted to the associate principal as organisational leader of the school. Parents see the principal as the final appeal ... 99.9% of the time the actions of the associate will be supported ... the distance gained in this way is valuable (P:Z).*

The problem of theorising experiences that are simultaneously diverse and similar can only be addressed by including the context in which these occur. While I have endeavoured to avoid the perpetuation of stereotypical essentialist discourses that describe male and female ways of operating in concrete and oppositional terms, I am interested in the ways in which

the three women and three men operate as leaders. I am not, though, positing a discourse of difference (Ferrario, 1991) which too often describes women as lacking, and men in possession of, the qualities deemed suitable for leadership. School leadership is an important constituent of the hidden curriculum of schooling (Alton-Lee & Densem, 1992; Grumet, 1988). It has to be understood within a network of power relations within schools and within the society in which it is located.

Recent changes in education (Grace, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Southworth, 1993) have provided the opportunity to reflect on the way schools are led. Largely this has not occurred. The position of associate principal has the potential to reduce the isolation of the principal, to provide the opportunity to reflect on professional practice, to engage in meaningful appraisal with a knowledgeable colleague, to take the first steps towards collaborative leadership, to provide a path that may facilitate movement of women into leadership positions in secondary schools. This thesis explores the position of associate principal to find out to what degree its radical potential, as a challenge to traditional leadership in schools, has been unleashed.